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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Santa Rosa Junior College (California) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The college's goals included the following: providing an ongoing forum where the various humanities disciplines can discuss their varying perspectives; initiating a college-wide conversation of American values and culture; promoting, enriching, and refining Humanities offerings; and providing the means and inspirations for faculty to develop courses to fulfill the proposed Intercultural Degree Requirement. To accomplish these goals, the American Cultures Program (ACP), composed of a public lecture series, a learning community course on American culture, and faculty study group, was developed. The learning community enrolled quickly and students reported having a very valuable experience. Although both the study group and lecture series are underway, plans are developing to unite the two programs. Obstacles faced by the college included limited start-up funds, unwillingness of people to change, and impacted public performance space, and faculty schedules. Remaining tasks include implementing a service learning program, establishing a permanent budget, planning the lecture series, and developing extensive ties with students and communities. The new ACP has attracted considerable interest and is becoming known as a emerging campus presence. (HAA)

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Santa Rosa Junior College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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PROGRESS REPORT
American Cultures Project
SANTA ROSA JUNIOR COLLEGE

Established in 1918, Santa Rosa Junior College is a large, single-campus but multi-site, public community college located 52 miles north of San Francisco in Sonoma County, California. The college attracts more than 30,000 students each semester (nearly 18,000 fulltime equivalent students), of whom 84% are enrolled for credit, 16% noncredit. Ethnically, 76% of the students are white, with the next-largest group being Hispanic (12%), and smaller but noticeable percentages of blacks, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and international students. Student ages range from the mid-teens to the seventies (the average is 28), with the majority of fulltime day students being 18-28 years old. Because the county remains largely rural and agricultural, the SRJC offers classes at various outlying locations; but the main campus in Santa Rosa offers a comprehensive program in general and vocational education, mostly to drive-in, suburban students. The college has maintained strong community ties for many years, centering on the artistic and intellectual life of the Santa Rosa area, through its performing arts programs, planetarium, Native American museum, and art gallery, as well as its athletic programs. Though student ethnic groups such as M.E.Ch.A. and the Black Student Union have remained fairly active in recent years, college ties to community ethnic groups are limited.

While it was felt that over the years SRJC had done much in the way of multicultural education—in staff development opportunities, in curriculum, and in events open to the campus and community—there was nevertheless a need for greater focus, and for sustained attention over time. The American Cultures Project of 1996 was designed to do the following:

- Provide an ongoing forum where the various humanities disciplines can present their differing perspectives on important aspects of American culture, and where both students and faculty have an opportunity to formulate a holistic view of American culture;
- Initiate a college-wide conversation on American values and culture;
- Support the promotion, enrichment, and refinement of our Humanities offerings;
- Provide means and inspiration for faculty to develop courses to fulfill the proposed Intercultural Degree Requirement (now to be called the American Cultures requirement).

To accomplish these things, we have worked to create a new, ongoing program, the American Cultures Program, composed initially of three parts: (1) a public lecture series, or "American Cultures Forum," (2) a learning-community course devoted to some aspect of American culture, and (3) a faculty study group. A fourth planned component, service learning, was seen early on to be something we might not be able to set up right away.

To date, much has been accomplished, but the effects of many of our efforts remain to be seen. Much of the work during 1996 has been planning and preparation for the lecture series, which will experience its inaugural semester in Spring '97. Seven lectures (nine total events) are scheduled to be held in the college's 200-seat auditorium, and these are being advertised via the printed Schedule of Classes and flyers to be distributed in January. A one-unit course has been set up for the lecture series, allowing students to get credit for attending the events and the discussion sessions organized around them. The overall theme for the semester is "E Pluribus Unum: Cultural Diversity and American Identity," and topics for the lectures and events are currently set as follows:

Soul Music: From Plato to Motown (An Exploration of "Formalism" and the "Devil's Music")

Evolution of the Blues Concert

Edwin Hawkins Gospel Singers

Entangled Lives: Facing Our Slaveholding Past

Feminist Theater: The History of Women's Theater in America

Landscape and Inscape: The Invention of American Culture

Crossing Cultures in Film

Panel: The Question of American Identity

This series has been planned by a steering committee representing faculty, staff and students from across the disciplines, and presenters include SRJC faculty as well as visiting experts.

The learning community course, "Declarations of Independence: Culture and Conflict in the Formation of American Identity," was offered for the first time in Fall '96. It enrolled quickly, and students in the class report having a very valuable experience. The course combines credit for English 1A (Reading and Composition) and History 21 (Race, Ethnicity and Gender in American Culture), and students have engaged in thorough discussions and writing projects centered on American pluralism. For them, the fall semester has truly included an in-depth "American conversation." As we head into Spring '97, we will have our first opportunity to implement the link between this course and the public

lecture series: the learning community students will be required to attend all lectures, thus providing a well-prepared core audience. It remains to be seen whether this feature of our plan will provide the sustained focus we hope for.

The faculty study group has now met three times, beginning is work by reading and discussing David Hollinger's *PostEthnic America* and several essays by James Baldwin, focussing on Baldwin's perspective on American identity as an African-American who lived in Europe for many years. Discussions have been exceedingly lively among the dozen or so members, who will continue to meet in the spring. Our plan and hope here, too, is that the study group will link up with the public lecture series—both by addressing issues that arise in that venue, and by discussions with visiting presenters. Another plan and hope for the study group is that it will address the challenges that arise in teaching aspects of American culture. While some of this kind of collegial discussion has occurred, much more can be done.

Thus, this project at SRJC has gotten a new program off to a fine start, but portions of the external "conversation" with community members and students remain to occur in the coming spring semester and beyond. Obstacles we have faced have included the following:

- a relative lack of start-up funds. We applied unsuccessfully for an NEH focus grant for Spring '97, to help us advertise, attract campus interest, and support coordination and curriculum development in connection with the college's proposed American Cultures degree requirement. We are moving ahead, but are having to scramble to pay for some aspects of the program.
- the inertia and uncertainty caused by having to work with various well-established constituencies and structures within the college. We have established ties with the Community Education/Arts and Lectures program, the Staff Development program, and other groups, but it has been slow going, and awkward. Over time, we feel that the understanding and cooperation of all these groups will constitute a great strength.
- a very impacted public performance space. Our 200-seat auditorium is an ideal, high-tech facility, but is very heavily used, and the competition particularly for noontime slots (crucial to our program) is intense.
- faculty time schedules. Holding meetings at times when many faculty can attend has been difficult.

In addition to continuing to overcome these obstacles, much remains to be done in the coming weeks and months. We need to begin seriously to consider implementing the

fourth part of our program design—service learning. Since this will likely require considerable institutional resources as well as significant liaison with the community, there is a lot of advance groundwork to be done. We hope to begin that work during Spring '97. And for the program at large, a permanent budget needs to be set up, and responsibility for administering it handed over to the new department chair or coordinator of Humanities/Interdisciplinary Studies in Fall '97. Indeed, in order to successfully institutionalize the program, we must see that the coordination needs are clearly defined and securely transferred to a strong advocate. We must immediately begin planning the year-long lecture series for 1997-98, and lining up another learning community course (or a repeat of the current one). It will also be important to consider in earnest how to include our Petaluma Center in the program. Most especially, we need to develop more extensive ties with students and community: (a) high school liaison, (b) more active involvement by our Associated Students and appropriate campus clubs, (c) awareness, involvement and support of community groups such as 100 Black Men and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. And finally, we need to continue to develop awareness and support within the faculty and staff at the college, so that the lecture series can truly become a "campus-wide forum."

The new American Cultures Program has attracted considerable interest at SRJC, and is becoming known as an emerging campus presence. (Students are now asking faculty members about it, for example, as they sign up for spring classes.) It will be important most of all to capitalize on that key accomplishment, and further its reach and inclusiveness.

As to how participants in our project have answered the questions, What does it mean to be an American? What brings us together? What do we have in common?, and so on, it is difficult to say with any completeness at this point. Members of the faculty study group have wrestled with the first question especially in the context of their readings, but have arrived at no clear consensus. Taking their discussions together with those in the learning community course and in the steering committee meetings, it is clear at least that we all tend to agree that we have our differences in common: that is, that the celebration of difference itself is now a very American and unifying element. Thus, the topics for the pilot semester of the lecture series emphasize celebration of American arts from different angles: blues, gospel, women's theater, etc. And yet there is also an emphasis on bringing ourselves together (the planned lecture on "Entangled Lives" is by two women, one a descendant of slaves and the other a descendant of their masters). And there is of course a posing of the question itself—

evidenced by the lecture on "Landscape and Inscape: The Invention of American Culture" and the panel on "The Question of American Identity." Answers to the question, What divides us?, are sketchy too at this point, though some among us have advanced the notion that class divides us more than race or ethnicity do.

We look forward with eagerness to the coming semesters, in which we expect to have a very active and focussed "conversation" on American pluralism and identity.